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Welfare reform legislation heads to governor

LANSING – Sen. Bill Hardiman, R-Kentwood, pledged his continued effort to improve Michigan's welfare policy and expand opportunities for the state's neediest, as reform legislation passed the Legislature on Tuesday.

"Our proposal for improving Michigan's welfare laws came after listening to clients, educators, job providers and front-line caseworkers," said Hardiman, who co-chaired a bipartisan, bicameral legislative welfare work group. "We're taking a new approach to welfare reform with an increased focus on job training and educational opportunities."

After the initial welfare reform legislation under Gov. Engler, Michigan saw its caseloads drop from about 240,000 to around 77,000. Those remaining on welfare need intensive assistance including education, job training and related programs to become independent, especially given the state's economy.

"I've been poor before, and I believe that people on welfare don't want to be on welfare," Hardiman said. "We have to break the cycle of dependency."

Hardiman's part of the welfare package is Senate Bill 892, which increases education and training opportunities. It would improve communication between agencies to work together and serve welfare recipients and work with them to develop plans to become independent.

"I remain hopeful that the research and dialogue about these bills ultimately will lead to better welfare policies and better outcomes for those needing assistance," Hardiman said.

The legislative package also would strengthen accountability for people abusing the welfare system after lawmakers heard directly from front-line caseworkers. The legislation also improves accountability measures for state departments to ensure long-term welfare recipients are identified and efforts focused on them.

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